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MEMORANDUM

IRAQ: Saddam Hussein's Rule and Protracted War

Summary

A protracted war of attrition between Iran and Iraq--contrary to Iraq's initial strategy--will undermine important political gains achieved by Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, probably weaken his hold on power, and lead to even heavier internal repression. Saddam continues to hold powerful cards and a protracted war need not be fatal; it is likely, however, to provoke serious disagreements among regime leaders over war strategy and disaffection within the military.

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Saddam's Rule Before the War

Iraqi ambitions to play a more decisive role in Arab and Persian Gulf politics have over the years been undermined by the regime's insecurity over domestic ethnic and religious differences, its image abroad of rule by repression, and its radical socialist ideology. Saddam Hussein, in the nearly 10 years he has been the regime's strongman, has reduced Iraq's vulnerability to all three weaknesses. He has contained domestic threats, held the country's first election in nearly a quarter century, and so muted Iraq's radical reputation that two conservative monarchies--Jordan and Morocco--are his most outspoken supporters in the fight against Iran.

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The War

Saddam now risks this progress in a war that he probably cannot win in any decisive military way. The conflict threatens Iraq's economic future, tests the still fragile unity of its

This memorandum was prepared by Southwest Asia Analytic Center, Near East South Asia Division, Office of Political Analysis. Questions and comments may be addressed to Deputy Chief, Southwest Asia Analytic Center

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people, and ultimately risks Saddam's own position. His most immediate problems are likely to be tensions between himself and the military, and major damage to Iraq's incipient image as the coming power center of the Arab world. []

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Saddam is a Baath Party functionary; unlike former President Bakr, who was eased out of office last year, Saddam was never in the military and his assumption of military rank several years ago was resented by the professionals. Saddam has dealt with this by seeking to indoctrinate the officer corps with party ideology and by sating the military's appetite for modern weaponry. A military failure, or even a stalemate, will touch off acrimonious attempts by both party and military to fix the blame on the other. []

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Before the war, Iraq projected an image abroad of power, both economic and military. That image already is badly damaged. Doubts about Iraq as a credible protector of Arab interests and about its long-term political stability seem certain to grow as the war continues. Iraq's relations with its Arab neighbors in the Persian Gulf will remain problematic. Those states' desire to avoid Iranian attack and their fear of Iranian-inspired Shia unrest in their own countries have caused them to give Baghdad only limited help. []

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At home, Iraqi enthusiasm for the war may already be declining in the face of air raids on Baghdad and other Iraqi cities. Heavy losses in the largely Shia military would erode morale further and could inspire antigovernment activity among Iraq's Shia majority. Port closures will eventually cause supply and distribution problems. The long-term economic damage could be substantial. []

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We have no evidence to suggest any antiregime move is under active consideration at present. The mere hint of plotting, or an increase in Shia or Kurdish activity, would probably set off a new round of government repression. Even without such activity, the regime is likely to become more restrictive and paranoid as the war lengthens. []

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Saddam Hussein, however, has survived more than a decade at the summit of a country whose politics are often bloody. His ability to maneuver and the levers of power he controls should not be underestimated. He has placed close associates in key positions throughout the government, party, and military. His exhaustive network of informers and his unflinching reputation to do away with any suspected opponents serve as major deterrents to the development of an organized opposition. []

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